"I Don't Know Where This is Going:" What Teenagers Learn About Marriage From Television and Magazines

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This past season viewers of the television series "Party of Five," a cult favorite among adolescent girls, were treated to the spectacle of two weddings - well, almost. In the first, Charlie, the oldest of the five orphaned siblings alluded to in the series' title, has second thoughts as he poses for his pre-nuptial pictures, leaving his confectionary bride weeping to the camera. In another some months later, that same abandonned bride, about to take her vows with a more reliable man, turns the tables and walks out on *him* when Charlie abruptly returns into her life. Not that a completed wedding is finally in the offing. "I can't promise you anything," Charlie explains to his jilted and jilting girlfriend after her near escape from marriage. "I don't know where this is going."

If you watch enough prime time television these days, you might get the idea that interrupted weddings are as common in American life as the Fourth of July picnic. There was one on the top rated series "E.R." and another on "Melrose Place," a campy prime time soap opera much beloved by adolescent girls. There was another in the first episode of another top rated show, the situation comedy "Friends" in which one of the major characters appears at her friend's apartment, a vision in her wedding dress. "I realized I was more turned on by the gravy boat than Barry," she whines to her understanding friend who will shortly become

her roommate in the unplanned new phase of her life. (In the next episode we learn that the resilient Barry used the honeymoon reservations to go off with the maid of honor.)

It's true that the interrupted wedding is not without honorable literary precedent, but the differences between yesterday and today's versions are instructive. In Shakespeare's Much Ado About Nothing Claudio forestalls his marriage to Hero after hearing false rumors of her faithlessness - in the *middle* of the play. The play ends, as comedy so often did in the past, with a marriage, in fact a double marriage, Claudio and his vindicated betrothed and the prototypical "witty duo," Beatrice and Benedict.

In the contemporary version, however, the interrupted wedding is the climactic moment of the "play." On "E.R.," for example, last year's season ended with the last minute thwarting of a wedding when one of the main characters admits to her fiance that although she loves him, she doesn't *love* him. After a brief cry, she shrugs her shoulders and joins the restless wedding party waiting under the caterer's tent. Viewers were left at the end of the season with the memorable image of a joyful celebration, complete with family and friends, a banquet, a toast, and a radiant, dancing, though groomless, bride.

For much of human history and across cultures, the wedding has served as the major rite of passage into adulthood, especially for young women. Like other ceremonial rites, it formalized and gave social meaning to a biological reality. It recognized the young couples' maturity, their preparedness to

reproduce, and therefore, to take their place among adults to raise the next generation. This meaning has not been been entirely lost. The would-be television brides or grooms flee their weddings precisely because they fear marriage's grave implications. In fact, the *nuptialis interruptus* offers a perfect contemporary countersymbol to the traditional wedding. A truly postmodern rite of passage, scenes like the one from "E.R." celebrate not the closure of childhood, newfound maturity, and the passing of generations, but freedom, openendedness and the elongation of youth. Underlying this rite is a profoundly changed life script in which traditional age boundaries and their predictable roles implode beyond recognition.

It will probably come as no surprise that in the popular culture consumed by adolescents these days, divorce is as common as bluejeans. On NBC on Thursday night, a line-up of shows about young singles which includes three of the most consistently top-rated shows on television, the prime time divorce rate must be nearing 90%. The straight-laced Mark Green, once the only married major character on "E.R," recently joined his single colleagues after his wife moved to another city and took up with another man. "Friends," judging from the number of references and star profiles in teen magazines among the most watched shows by adolescent girls, concerns a set of six friends in their mid to late twenties. Of the six, all but two come from broken homes. The exceptions, a brother and sister, are actually from the same miserable union. Two of the characters are themselves

already veterans of the divorce wars, including one whose pregnant wife left him for her female lover. (All of this evidently explains why one of its creators calls "Friends" "a family show for the 90's."[1]) On "Seinfeld," one character has had to referee the temporary break-up and dating life of his own parents, such old-fashioned, elderly Queens ethnics that an appointment with a monument salesman seems more in order than an appearance in divorce court. (In teen magazines, except for Seventeen's single recurrent Estee Lauder ad with a picture perfect bride, marriage is conspicuously absent, a silence I will discuss later.)

Yet it would be wrong to conclude from this litany of marital failure that Hollywood has entirely written off the institution. Behind television's mocking sneers and crisp put-downs lies a hazy feeling that there is something sketchy, and perhaps even banal, about these singles' often pleasure-filled existence. This season "Seinfeld" began with two of the main characters, George and Jerry, sitting in their favorite booth at the local coffee shop discussing Jerry's break up with a girl for "shushing" him while she was watching TV. The dialogue that follows sits flat on paper but is humorous coming, as it does, from the mouths of two such determinedley silly boy-men whose main preoccupations are sports, girls, and action-adventure movies: "What are we doing?" asks Jerry suddenly. "What kind of lives are these? We're not men. Are we going to be sitting here when we're sixty?" George answers excitedley; "We should be having dinner with our sons when we're sixty! ..We're kids.

We're not men." Jerry gets even more worked up and goes so far as to hint he will marry; "I want to be normal. I'm going to do something about my life!"

The good news, then, is that the diamond is still supposed to be forever, that marriage continues to represent maturity and stability; "I'm a man, Jerry! I'm a man!" George gloats on his engagement. The bad news is that for these qualities place marriage on a scale from the frightening to the just plain unthinkable. Jerry thinks better of proposing to his girlfriend once he actually sees her again and the panicky George has spent the entire season doing everything he can to delay his impending encounter with "normality." If you were to add a few gags, the words of a twenty-four year editorial assistant at Elle interviewed by the New York Times at her friend's wedding could easily have been part of the script; "Picturing myself up there on the altar scared me. It was a real wake-up call for me that possibly I could be an adult right now...As an adolescent and a young woman there's always a sense that nothing is irreversible. I can keep changing my mind and keep amending my decisions. Getting married is the first time you can't go back on something."[2] Surprising as it is given their familiarity with divorce, both the fictional and real young appear to continue to view marriage as a sign of a stable, in fact "irreversible," "normal" adult life.

If as an institution portending stability and permanence marriage is feared, as an expressive act, it is admired. Consider the one couple eagerly willing to undertake the

"irreversible" on the Thursday night singles ghetto in a wedding which received a good deal of press. On "Friends" the ex-wife of Ross, one of the main characters, marries her lesbian lover. Ross eventually comes to enthusiastically support the union, like the rest of the ensemble, because, as he says, if "you love her...then that's all that matters." The minister at the ceremony (played, as if the political message needed clarifying, by House Speaker Newt Gingrich's gay sister) announces in the same vein; "Nothing makes God happier than when two people, *any* two people are joined in love." The mirror image of the "E.R." marriage called off due to a lack of romantic intensity, the "Friends" wedding apparently deserves the joyful tears which follow it because it is founded on true love. What's striking here is not, as some activists would argue, the victory for civil rights and tolerance. Rather, the gay union's very violation of tradition is itself proof of expressive authenticity. It is an extreme version of the couple from the 70's who say their vows on a beach at sunrise. Only those stepping outside the boundaries of convention convince us that is they who own the institution rather than the institution which owns them.[3]

Granted, the anxiety about the conflict between stable maturity and expressive authenticity we see in today's singles shows is hardly new to popular culture. Barbara Ehrenreich has traced the growth of the Playboy philosophy which viewed marriage as a miserable prison for men's true sexually adventurous nature.[4] The stock character of the nervous bridegroom probably extends even further back. What is new, of course, is that women

have joined in the angst. On "E.R." the thwarted bride weeps; "What's wrong with me? Why can't I love a man who loves me, wants to settle down, and take care of me?" Her dashing, feckless former boyfriend thinks for a moment. "Boring," he answers, and she laughs. On "Friends," we are pointedley told that Rachel's abandoned bridegroom was an orthodontist, a word with all the dismissive power of "plastics" in The Graduate. (In that 1968 movie the hero, memorably played by a young Dustin Hoffman, initiates perhaps the first example of the contemporary *nuptialis interruptus*, when he barges into the church to stop his true love's wedding to another man.) Both "plastics" and "orthodontist" epitomize the life in its most bourgeois form - confining, dull, and false - which threaten the hero or heroine's sense of adventure and open-endedness. So Rachel's boyfriend in a later episode says, referring to her near miss from married life in the suburbs, one of the reasons he loves her is for her courage in "starting her life over."

"Starting life over" is a telling phrase. For there is something consciously childlike about the twenty-somethings of "Friends" and "Seinfeld." (Though this is not the case on "E.R.") On "Friends," two of the male leads play a game popular among the ten-year-old set called foos-ball on the rare occassions when they're not watching TV. One of them, unaccountably dressed for this episode in a suit and tie, brags about the hard drive and REM capacity of his new computer. "Nice," says one of the friends. "What will you do with it?" He looks blank for a minute before answering, "Games 'n stuff." On

"Seinfeld," Kramer wants to be a fireman; George loves Bosco and milk; Elaine and Kramer fight over a Schwinn bicycle.

Still, they are not children; neither are they adolescents nor as we have seen, are they adults. These characters occupy a hazy status we might call postmodern postadolescence. Living on their own but unsettled, responsible but unfocused, their ill-defined limbo is the very essence of their identity. When not stalled in front of the TV in their IKEA furnished apartments, they drift in pleasurable vacancy around the city, going to movies and restaurants, hanging out in old fashioned coffee shops or trendy coffee bars. They date and have sex. They talk about dating and sex. They drop in on their friends as casually and frequently as students in a college dorm.

Television's postmodern postadolescent, old enough to be independent of his family but terrified of beginning his own, finds in his friends the idealized companionship the medium once promised viewers in the family shows of the 50's. David Schwimmer, one of the stars of "Friends," speculated in an interview that part of the show's appeal arises out of the longings of children of divorce who constitute much of the show's audience; "I think for some people it's a fantasy to have this close a group of people, to have a family really...So many people have grown up products of divorce or not ideal family situations. And to have this kind of solid support group is something ... everyone wants in their lives."[5]

Yet here the postmodern plot thickens, for while the young single believes in authentic love, a serious relationship

inevitably threatens his connection to his substitute family. When George becomes engaged and his fiance insists that he must tell her everything including his friends' confidences, Jerry pronounces his miserable friend "out of the loop!" On the other hand, Carol, the "E.R." heroine left at the altar by her doubtful fiance, easily substitutes her colleagues as her love object; "I guess I'm just lucky to be alive and have such wonderful friends," she toasts. These words are followed by misty Hallmark shots of friends laughing, embracing, and dancing. Here, the *nuptialis interruptus* marks its bride's passage into the bosom of the postadolescent peer group, just as it celebrates her open-ended, expressively pure youth.

To some extent postmodern postadolescence is just another Hollywood fiction - few singles in their twenties can afford a city apartment with or without roomates - but it nevertheless reflects several real demographic trends. First, marriage, especially for the more sophisticated, affluent viewers targeted by television advertisers, is receding into the mid and late twenties. Further, the never married constitutes one of the fastest growing segments of the adult population - it has doubled since 1970 - and most of that growth has been among men and women in their 20's and 30's. In 1960 only 28.4% of 20 to 24 year olds were single; in 1988, the percentage had climbed to over 60%. The change is even more striking among 25-29 year olds; in 1960 only 11% remained single compared to almost 30% in 1988. The biggest jump occured in the later part of that time period; the

number of unmarried women in their late twenties tripled between 1970 and 1988.[6]

This rise in the age of first marriage is closely related to another important demographic change: the expansion of higher education. In 1959 there were just a little over 2,000 institutions of higher education in the United States. By 1992, there were 3,638. In 1959 about three and half million students were enrolled in these insitutions. By 1992, that number had climbed to close to fourteen and a half million.[7] In a comparison of two cohorts of white American high school graduates, one completing school in the early 60's and another in the early 80's, Buchmann found an increase in the number of those enrolled in four year college from about 25% to 40%.[8]

These two demographic facts portend a significant shift from a generation ago in the expected life script, a shift now cleverly exploited on network television. For today's young the passage from childhood to adulthood is likely to last considerably longer than it did for their parents. This is not true for all of their parents: in 1968 Keniston already noted an emerging new stage of what he called "youth" among the affluent.[9] However, as the figures cited above suggest, since the time Keniston wrote higher education has expanded to include far more than the privileged class which was the subject of his analysis. In Buchmann's study the percentage of those in the 1980 group who had completed the transitions traditionally associated with adulthood - namely, school, marriage or parenthood - within four years after high school graduation had dropped by more than half

from the 1960 group.[10] Buchmann's results also suggest that the end of school and first job have faded as markers of adulthood as the rates of part-time employment among students in high school and college rose.[11] "Educational, occupational, and family career no longer seem to follow stable, continuous, and highly predictable courses," Buchman concludes. The transition to adulthood is becoming a process of "gradual integration rather than clear demarcation."[12]

Yet striking as these changes are, they offer us little by way of an explanation about the postadolescent's postmodern drift. Historians of the family have discovered that marriage in the mid or late twenties preceded by an extensive period of work training is actually part of a long, though "extraordinary and unique" Western tradition.[13] It is actually the period after World War II with its marriage in the early twenties which was anomalous. In turn of the century America, women married at 22, men at 26. In Western Europe (though not so much in Eastern or Southern areas of the continent) marriage in the mid to late twenties has been the norm since premodern times. Laslett found that in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, the average age for women was 24 and for men just short of 28, though teen marriage was not uncommon among the nobility.[14] Stone shows a steadily increasing age of marriage for both men and women of the upper landed classes throughout the 17th and 18th century and for the daughters of small property owners and laborers whose average went as high as a remarkable 27.[15]

Further, though in the past it took the form of apprenticeships and domestic service rather than formal education, a long period of training before a settled work career is also nothing new to Western history. As young as 7 or 8 in the Middle Ages and 12 or 13 in the 18th and 19th centuries many a boy was sent after a few years of scattershot schooling to live and work as an apprentice in a family business. "Surplus" teens, boys and girls from large families, were often employed as domestic servants. Those who did remain at home were part of the household economy. Farm children were tapped to plow the fields, tend horses and cattle, make cheese, or spin wool. As for those who did go on to college, they seem impossibly young by our standards. As late as the mid 19th century boys might leave for college as early as 14 and finish at 17 though most young people by that time did not leave home until their 20's.[16]

Moreover, though the generation gap may be an artifact of fast-changing modernity, the shiftless, impulsive unmarried young, sexually mature but socially incomplete, has been a recurring and inevitable theme in societies like our own with a long and ill-defined transition period between childhood and full adulthood. Shakespeare described it in his Winter's Tale. "I would there were no age between ten and three and twenty," rues a shepherd in that romance, "or that youth would sleep out the rest; for there is nothing in between but getting wenches with child, wrongdoing the ancientry, stealing, fighting..." In America a little more than a century later, Jonathan Edwards lamented the numbers of youth "very much addicted to night-

walking, frequenting the tavern, and lewd practices" who "frequently gathered in conventions of both sexes, for mirth and jollity, which they called frolics...without regard to any order in the families..."[17]

Much as youth of earlier times resembled youth of today in its length, uncertainty, and potential for trouble-making, it nevertheless constituted a clearly defined life stage recognized by the entire community as having its own set of obligations and expectations, different from both adult and young child. Geographical independence did not mean emotional and psychological freedom; youth was tightly interwoven in the social order of family and village or town. Young people were expected to give some of their pay to their family and were supposed to help out in case of injury, layoffs or death.[18] Many of the young were needed to maintain family farms.

Communal ties were reinforced through youth groups, some of them connected with the parish church, others with craft guilds. Although often enough these groups did their share of drinking and gambling, and perhaps some "wrongdoing the ancientry," they also helped organize local religious processions and celebrations.[19] Surprising as it is to us today who take the rebelliousness of the young for granted, these fraternities played a role in reinforcing sexual norms. In early modern France and parts of Italy peasant youth groups made use of the *charivari* (known as rough music in England) to protest violations of the sexual order. Bands of young men carried an effigy of a dead spouse when a widower remarried a younger woman and

serenaded him with pots and pans. They harassed cockolds and wife beaters and decorated the doorways of promiscuous girls with gorse. As for their own sexual behavior, boys might "bundle" with girls in their bedrooms, but on pain of rough group censure, had to forgo intercourse until betrothal.[20]

The essence of youth was its single state just as the soul of adulthood was married life. In Europe and America the wedding was the only commonly recognized rite of initiation into adulthood, "the most important transition in life," according to Mitterauer [21] Before marriage the young virgin could be identified by her loose hair bound with a garland. The married woman covered her alluring locks with a bonnet. Before marrying a twenty-four year old or even a forty-year-old might be called "garcon," especially if he were a domestic, journeyman or soldier. After marriage, he was "homme." Before marriage, if he were from an English village, he would be part of a team of unmarried men at festival athletic contests; after marriage he moved to the teams of marrieds. In some communities to mark her passage from youth to the ranks of the married, the bride was first expected to dance with each of the unmarried guests, after which she danced with each of the married ones. In parts of Europe an unmarried man was laid out for his funeral in his wedding clothes, his coffin accompanied by a "white bride" and a "black bride," a symbolic way of completing his foreshortened life span. For, writes Mitterauer, "Only with marriage has a person achieved his or her purpose in life. Youth, by contrast, is a state of incompleteness."[22]

If marriage, and, it follows, reproduction, were the "purpose in life," why did they occur so late? The logic behind late marriage appears to have been almost entirely economic. In Western Europe and America, unlike many tribal groups for instance, married couples were expected to set up their own home. Young men could easily reach their late twenties before they had either accumulated the money or inherited the land on the death of a parent which would give them the financial independence required for a separate home.[23]. So, for instance, younger sons of the landed gentry who had to make their own way through a military service or training in the law married far later, often in their early to middle thirties in the eighteenth century, than their elder brothers who stood to inherit property.[24] What was clear to the youth of the past was that no matter how long it took they had a fundamental task: to prepare for marriage and an independent home.

A long transitional period between childhood and adulthood and late marriage may be nothing new to the Western biography, but there are, nonetheless, several glaring differences between today's postmodern postadolescent and yesterday's youth. First, unlike yesterday's youth who lived in a condition scholars call "semi-dependence," today's version is free to take up residence independent of their family, surrounded by others living just like them. With no communal ties or obligations, they can wander to the pleasure-filled city of their choice where they might create small lifestyle enclaves. It's impossible to overstate

the depth of this change; the twentieth century initiated probably for the first time in human history, a new biographical possibility: young single life in an independent home, that is, complete autonomy for men *and* women.[25] In fact, this episode in the life story now appears to have become an ideal. Where a generation ago a college co-ed dreamt of a June wedding, today her fantasy, if prime time television is any indication of these things, is living alone and continuing the adolescent pleasure of "hanging" with friends. The powerful peer group, so great a concern to social critics in the fifties like David Reisman and James Coleman, has expanded from high school to college dorm and beyond the institution to city apartment.

The makers of popular culture have not been entirely oblivious to the dilemmas posed by these new demographics. Since the mid 70's with "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," when the situation comedy, like the title character herself, moved out of the suburban family home and into the city singles apartment, they have sometimes given voice to the apprehensions inevitable with profound social change. Mary was the modern young career woman. Her life centered around her job in a television newsroom and her friends, one married (though we never see her family) and the other single and desperate. The strained optimism of the opening theme song - "You're going to make it after all" - introduced a mild uneasiness about Mary's autonomy; it was always as if she were trying on a dress which didn't quite fit. It's no coincidence that in "Rhoda," a spinoff series, her single friend lands a husband. Rhoda's wedding, the completed rather than the

interrupted kind, was one of those fleeting crazes so common in American life, garnering the highest ratings for any show ever up until that time.

Today we are witnessing an explosion in the young, affluent, and single genre: "Seinfeld," "Friends," "Ellen," "E.R.," "Caroline in the City," "The Single Guy," "Boston Common," some forthcoming spinoffs, and several popular movies. Only a few of the more sophisticated ones hint at the strangeness of their characters' limbo. The title of one movie, Singles, refers both to its characters' marital status as well as to their one bedroom Seattle apartments. The soft comedy begins on a determinedley upbeat note with a young woman standing in front of a house; "I was living in this duplex. For the first time, I was alone," she says smiling to the camera. "No dorm. No roomates. My own place. I was so happy." But after an initially rocky love affair which happily culminates when she and her boyfriend move in together, Singles ends in an intentionally ambiguous mood. "Some people think living alone is a nasty hang," says Cliff, an aspiring though prodigiously untalented rock musician. "Not me...I'm a self-contained unit." The self-contained residential unit becomes the movie's symbol of the autonomy of the postmodern postadolescent, an autonomy the sophisticated script gently mocks for all its sad, self-deluded isolation.

The second key difference between youth of yesterday and today is more subtle but can be glimpsed in the aimlessness that some insightful postadolescents like Cameron Crowe, writer and director of Singles, and Jerry Seinfeld, writer and star of his

epononymous series, seem to recognize. As we saw, youth of the past had a central task: to prepare themselves for a fixed state known as adulthood, a state communally defined by marriage. Before marriage, an individual was unfinished; after it, he or she was complete. Not only do today's youth have no such clearly marked terminus; the entire life script has become an indecipherable maze. Theirs is a winding journey with adventures but no destination, a meandering life story with lively episodes but no meaningful climax.

It's easy to see that the major cause of this lies in the well-chronicled de-institutionalization of marriage. But there is another important and less widely observed root closely connected to the collapse of marriage, one which can shed unexpected light on the odd condition of today's youth: the postindustrial work career. At one time individuals could expect to complete their training and enter into a relatively stable work identity, but such is no longer the case. Whereas the first two-thirds of the twentieth century was a time of relative stability in technology and industry, in 1968 Peter Drucker announced that we had entered "The Age of Discontinuity."[26] "Continuing change is now a fact of life," according to management expert Rosabeth Moss Kanter.[27] Buchman cites several reasons for the "less stable career trajectories,"[28] he observed in the younger cohort in his comparison of 1960 and 1980 high school graduates. With innovations coming at an increasingly rapid pace and a constantly shifting marketplace, workers find themselves having to modify their jobs or even enter entirely new

professions. The Age of Discontinuity makes it far more difficult for individuals to calculate and plan their lives with the same degree of certainty.[29] The explosive growth of temporary agencies and in the number of "contingent workers" are another manifestation of the same discontinuity.[30]

No longer, then, can adulthood be understood as meaning a relatively stable identity in relation to work. In 1968 Drucker advocated a life span which would include several occupations. He suggested a "second knowledge career" allowing middle aged workers to retrain in order to become "teachers, ministers, social workers, nurses or doctors."[31] Atleast in its general outline his idea seems to have become a reality. Training for work has not only expanded into later youth, it has also crept into adulthood. "Higher education is no longer something one does only between 18 and 22 and then is set for life," according to the executive director of National University Continuing Education Association. "Education today is on-going - whether you're doing it just for self-improvement or to remain employable."[32] In 1980, only one in four college students was over 25 years old. By 1990, the percentage had almost doubled to four in ten. In fact, 18% of college students were over 35. The growth of part time enrollments greatly outpaces full time enrollments as older workers return to school for retraining.[33]

To thrive in a work world spinning on the wheels of megatrends, today's knowledge worker requires psychological qualities rather different from yesterday's organization man (not to mention the butcher, baker or candlestick maker.) The

organization man of the past needed loyalty, steadiness, and moderation in his slow but steady climb up the corporate ladder. Today's man and woman of the globalized economy must be a quick and supple "business athlete." Kanter cites the "four f's" of today's sought after worker: "focused, fast, friendly, flexible."[34] "In a knowledge economy where skill is based on knowledge and where technology and economy are likely to change fast," writes Drucker in the same vein, "...the only meaningful job security is the capacity to learn fast. The only real security in an economy and society at flux is to know enough to be able to move."[35] The paradox of the new work order is security founded on mobility, stability built on the ability to change.

Pop psychology was quick to offer a new theory of personality to correspond to the postindustrial zeitgeist. Perhaps the most famous was Gail Sheehy's Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life, published in 1976 and in its 37th printing by 1987. Sheehy celebrated what she saw as "the underlying impulse toward change" in the healthy adult's "lifelong pursuit of identity." "You are moving out of roles and into the self," she wrote. "If I could give a gift for the send-off on this journey, it would be a tent. A tent for tentativeness." She refers disparagingly to "locked in" souls, those who resist tentativeness, seeking security and permanence. "Times of cirsis," she continued, "of disruption or constructive change, are not only predictable but desirable. They mean growth."[36] "Growth," once the province of the child, became the prerogative of the adult. In 1976 ex-anti-war activist Jerry Rubin published Growing Up at 37; magazines with

titles like Personal Growth appeared on the newstands. More recently we find books with titles like Growing Up Again: Parenting Ourselves, Parenting Out Children. As the comic writer Dave Barry has put it; "Many of us, I'm convinced, only look like grown-ups."

The makeover of adulthood into growth and tentativeness has found its way into academic psychology as well. "We are becoming fluid and many-sided," Robert Jay Lifton writes in The Protean Self. "Without quite realizing it, we have been evolving a sense of self appropriate to the restlessness and flux of our times." [37] Although he includes a chapter entitled "The Dark Side," Lifton's optimism about the "self of many possibilities" or "the malleability of the self" is strikingly out of sync with traditional Freudian scepticism about psychic freedom. It is no coincidence that Rosabeth Moss Kanter, the management expert who describes "fast" and "flexible" as the requirements for today's worker, praises The Protean Self in a book blurb as "deep and wise."

The redefinition of the adult personality is also apparent in the changing attitude towards marriage. In 1950 Erik Erikson described adulthood as the period of generativity when the primary task is "establishing and guiding the next generation."[38] Other psychologists implicitly joined Erikson in this view. They believed the selection of a mate and adjustment to marriage constituted the primary task of young adulthood. They viewed the bachelor as a kind of child - irresponsible, selfish, immature and possibly even suffering from a mother-fixation. The sea-

change which followed finds its expression in a 1981 essay in which A. Alvarez wrote in some bewilderment about his first marriage in the fifties; "I had this terrible lust for premature maturity, this irresponsible desire for responsibility, before I had any idea what maturity involved or had even tasted the pleasures of youthful irresponsibility."[39] Of course, Alvarez is criticizing what he believes to have been his personal delusions, but what's striking about this statement is its evocation of a profound cultural shift. A young man in the Eriksonian 50's longed not to "grow" but to grow up and, it followed automatically, to be married. Even a middle aged man in the Sheehyesque 80's cannot conceive of such a dream.

Alvarez' passage offers a miniature history of the emerging youth culture. Instead of sorting and classifying individuals according to age, American society veered towards becoming a chronological melting pot whose distilled essence was youth. The blurring of age boundaries finds its most obvious symbol in the uniform clothing worn by children, their parents and grandparents. But the ascendent youth culture is obviously far more than a matter of middle aged women in mini-skirts or grandfathers in Levis. The new adult is structurally and emotionally similar to youth. Psychologically, both adult and youth are characterized by flexibility, openness to change, an eye for trends. Strucutrally, a nineteen-year-old boy and a thirty-two-year-old man might both be part-time students and part-time workers; a twenty-year-old girl and a fifty-year-old woman might both be single and living without children. Even

parent and child can be peers. "I have a great relationship with my dad," chirps 16-year-old Kristy in an article entitled "The Father-Daughter Dance" in Seventeen. "...And the way he and his girlfriend interact is so great. It's the way I want to be."

This erasure of the differences between old and young leaves youth without its traditional task: they cannot prepare for an adulthood that no longer exists. In fact, it would take a prodigy to decipher even the broadest outlines of a life course. The average age of first marriage for women today is 24, but this number disguises the huge variations, as attested in a recent Bride's Magazine feature entitled "Marriage at 20, 30, 40." Pick up a newspaper in any given week and you may very well read of both a 44-year-old first time mother and her 14-year-old peer. In 1980, births to women over 35 accounted for 5% of all births; that number is expected to double by the end of the century. A woman today can easily find herself simultaneously mother and grandmother to newborn infants (See, for example, the recent Father of the Bride 2, a movie whose climax has the hero rushing between daughter and wife in nearby delivery rooms.) In one famous case with the help of new reproductive technologies which allow a woman to loan her womb, one woman was simultaneously mother and grandmother to the same baby.

Television has served as a propaganda machine for all of these emerging trends. Its fictions do not so much reflect the truths about postmodern life as they either idealize or, at the very least as in the examples of "Mary Tyler Moore" and

"Seinfeld," declaw them. The young watching the singles shows today learn to laugh at the "tentativeness" of their parents and even grandparents. On "Friends," the gorgeous Rachel believes that her mother is coming to visit her to berate her for not marrying Barry, the dreaded orthodontist, and "get[ing] the big house in the suburbs". Rachel must be thinking of a mother from yesteryear's sit coms. Her own is visiting to tell her she wants to get divorced and come live with her daughter so she can date and have fun with her friends. "I thought of all people you'd understand," she tells her disbelieving child. "You didn't marry your Barry but I married mine."

In an ad for Prudential insurance during one of these shows a white haired woman is shown dancing in a bucolic field. "At 50 I found myself alone. I got divorced," she says in the gravelly voice of experience. "I opened up a ballet school. You have to manage life." Jacob, the divorced father of the "Party of Five's" dead mother, shows up suddenly to explain himself to the grandchildren he has never known. "When I was married to your grandmother all those years, whenever I felt trapped I would drive around for a few hours." One time, he continues, he just kept driving. In the fluid, uncertain postmodern world, the young learn they can't even count on grandma or grandpa. But then, they are reminded, they don't need them either.

At times, particularly when it comes to sex, youthful viewers are flattered as their peers are revealed to be more experienced than clueless adults. On "E.R." Doug, a world class lothario, easily seduces his father's new girlfriend. On "Friends," Joey

passionately kisses Rachel's blushing mother and Monica dates a recently divorced acquaintance of her parents. In the latter example the difference in age could be seen as merely an example of the male attraction to the young virgin, an attraction known to men as different as Mao Zedong and Woody Allen. But in this case it is the older man who is the "virgin" - it seems his wife had been his first and only sexual partner - while Monica, over twenty years younger than her middle-aged lover - is the experienced one, whose impressively long sexual vitae has been the frequent object of her friends' jokes.

The writers of these shows are not plowing new fields here; television has played a pivotal role in advancing the emerging ethos of age androgyny over the past thirty years. Postman noted that contestants on game shows are required to yell, giggle, and jump up and down, in short to act like children. At the time he was writing, twelve year olds shared the same preferences for popular entertainment as their fathers, shows like "Three's Company," "The Dukes of Hazard," "Laverne and Shirley" and movies like Raiders of the Lost Ark and For Your Eyes Only.[40] One thinks as well of the weird boy-men of Hollywood like Pee Wee Herman and Tiny Tim, as well as their more conventional counterparts like Michael Fox whose most famous movies, the Back to the Future series, cast him as both teenager and middle-aged father and also Tom Hanks, the age androgynous hero of two major hits of recent years, Big (a boy magically takes on a man's body) and Forrest Gump (a childlike retarded man as American picaresque hero). And

of course, there are waif celebrity models like Brooke Shields and Kate Moss.

Advertisers, who have their own reasons for stirring up childish desires and restless longing, have also played an important role in making television a no-man's land. In a pitch for Frosted Flakes an adult ambivalent about a bowl of the sugared cereal sitting in front of him morphs into a child all set to dig in and enjoy. A recent ad for the Rodeo jeep, the perfect symbol of adult play, also makes explicit the grown up's not so inner child. A father races his toddler through a Toys R Us style mega-toy store trying to distract him from the temptations beckoning everywhere. Suddenly the older man sees a shiny red Rodeo wrapped inside a plastic box and his eyes grow wide. "Grow Up Not Old," says the voice over. In another ad for Reebok a sweaty, muscle-clenching woman of about thirty works out in an exercise class. "This is what makes me any age I want to be," says the disengenuous voice over, for you can be sure she doesn't want to be 50.

This unquestioned superiority of youth leads to a notable complacency in teen magazines. Why should a teenager dream of the future when she occupies the idealized youthful present? Magazines invite their readers to rest in a splashily colorful, partying, endless now. Columns with titles like "Trends", "Scoop: the inside story on the latest, the cutest, the weirdest, and the greatest stuff going," "What's Hip, What's Had it" hypnotize the young with the endless glamour of changing fashion, the now. The only future they learn of is through profiles and

gossip about celebrities slightly older than themselves, whose postadolescence offers merely a slightly more independent version of their own peer-oriented existence.

This complacency becomes especially striking when you compare issues of Seventeen from the late 50's or early 60's to those of today. In the past, Seventeen did not merely wave the dream of the wedding in front of their unliberated readers as one might expect. They also included a column titled "Looking Ahead to College" with "news and facts about colleges, ideas for careers, answers to your college questions." In today's teen magazines such serious future-mindedness would be unthinkable. Marriage has vanished along with the ads for china and silver, and the few articles concerning college are about sports teams and how to navigate a typical weekend of campus partying. How ironic it is that today's editors see in their straight talk about sex and boys flattering evidence that they don't patronize their readers as their counterparts did in the past.[41] Once Seventeen recommended books like A Single Pebble or Cry, the Beloved Country. In the August 1994 issue, the magazine's Editor in Chief advises "read trash, stay cool, and don't forget your sunscreen."

Between the worship of youth and the related collapse of a shared vision of the life story, marriage has suffered a double blow. This injury, like a family curse of obscure origins, is passed on to the next generation. In the popular culture they consume, they learn that marriage with its lingering aura of permanence symbolizes a kind of adulthood no longer entirely

familiar or admired. And they absorb the sense that marriage marks a climax in a life story whose contours have been erased, that it is a relic, though an honorable one, from a different age and a different biography. In the postmodern postadolescence of the singles TV show, they see not so much a new life stage as evidence of a hazy, ill-defined future. And in the interrupted wedding they can find the essence of the postmodern narrative which starts over rather than climaxes, making it a perfect fit with the ongoing, yet constantly interrupted, television series. Remember the words of Charlie in "Party of Five;" "I can't promise anything. I don't know where this is going." Or there's the romantic version in an ad for perfume in a recent Seventeen: "Life's an Open Road...Break the rules, go with your heart, the world is wide and anything...anything...can happen."
For more on the subject of gays and television, see Ehrenstein, "More than Friends: How Sitcoms Became the New Gay Art Form," Los Angeles, May 1996.

[1]David Wild, Friends: The Official Companion, (New York, Doubleday, 1996).
[2]Lois Smith Brady, "Vows: Janice Lee and Joseph Bae," The New York Times, April 14, 1996.
[3] For more on gays and television, see Ehrenstein, "More than Friends: How Sitcoms Became the New Gay Art Form," Los Angleles, May 1996.
[4]Barbara Ehrenreich, The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment (New York, Anchor, 1984).
[5]Gerri Hirshey, "David Schwimmer," GQ, March, '96, p.234.
[6]Marital Status and Living Arrangements (Washington, U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, 1994).
[7]Data from The Digest of Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 1995.
[8]Marlis Buchmann, The Script of Life in Modern Society: Entry into Adulthood in a Changing World (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989) p.118.
[2] Kenneth Keniston, Young Radicals: Notes on Committed Youth (New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1968.)
[10]Buchmann, p. 110
[11]Buchmann, p. 132.
[12]Buchmann, p. 182. See also Thomas Held, "Institutionalization and Deinstitutionalization of the Life Course," Human Development 29 (1986): 157-70.
[13]Lawrence Stone, The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800, (New York, Harper and Row, 1979), p. 44.
[14]Peter Laslett, The World We Have Lost: England Before the Industrial Age (New York, Scribner's and Sons, 1965) pp.82-3.
[15]Stone, p. 44.
[16]See Philippe Aries, Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life (trans. Robert Baldick (New York, Knopf, 1962), p. 362 and passim. Also John

R. Gillis, Youth and History: Tradition and Change in European Age Relations (New York, Academic Press, 1981).
[17]quoted in Ross W. Beales Jr. "In Search of the Historical Child: Miniautre Adulthood and Youth in Colonial New England," American Quarterly 28 (1975) p.395
[18]John Modell, Frank F. Furstenberg Jr. and Theodore Hershberg, "Social Change and Transitions to Adulthood in Historical Perspective," Journal of Family History 1 (1976) pp. 29-30.
[19]Michael Mitterauer, A History of Youth (Cambridge, Blackwell, 1993): 162ff.
[20]John R. Gillis, Youth and History: Tradition and Change in European Age Relations, 1770-Present, (New York, Academic Press, 1981), p. 30.
[21]Material in the following paragraph comes from Mitterauer, pp.79, 165.
[22]Mitterauer, p. 79.
[23]Gillis, p. 14.
[24]Mitterauer, p.82 and Stone, p.42.
[25]For some, this fact alone discourages the emotional qualities required for stable marriages. See Alice S. Rossi, "Gender and Parenthood," in Gender and the Life Course (New York, Aldine de Gruyter, 1985), 161-91 and Linda J. Waite, Frances K. Goldscheider, and Christina Witsberger, "Nonfamily Living and the Erosion of Traditional Family Orientations Among Young Adults," American Sociological Review 51 (1986): 541-54.
[26]Peter F. Drucker, The Age of Discontinuity: Guidelines to Our Changing Society (New York, Harper and Row, 1968).
[27]Rosabeth Moss Kanter, When Giants Learn to Dance: Mastering the Challenge of Strategy, Management, and Careers in the 1990's, (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1989) p. 365.
[28]Buchmann, 48.
[29]Buchmann, 49-50
[30]Kanter, p.302.
[31]Drucker, 293-4.
[32]quoted in "Special Strategies for Continuing Education," "Campus Tours and Open Houses" Special Advertising Supplement, New York Times, April 24, 1996.
[33]Sam Roberts, Who We Are: A Portrait of America Based on the Latest U.S. Census (New York, Times Books, 1993) p. 227.
[34]Kanter, p. 361.
[35]Drucker, p. 305.
[36]Gail Sheehy, Passages:Predictable Crises of Adult Life, (New York, Dutton, 1976) pp.21, 251.
[37]Robert Jay Lifton, The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation (New York, Basic Books, 1993) p.1.
[38]Erik H. Erikson, Childhood and Society Second Edition (New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 1963) p.267.
[39]quoted in Ehrenreich, p. 17.
[40]Neil Postman, The Disappearance of Childhood Second Edition (New York, Vintage, 1994) p.122 and passim.
[41]Angela McRobbie, Feminism and Youth Culture, (Boston, Unwin, 1991) p.136.